

SÁNDOR BÁLINT (1904–1980): A LIFE'S WORK IN ETHNOLOGY OF RELIGION

Sándor Bálint, nationally acclaimed professor of the Department of Ethnology of Szeged University, was born a hundred years ago. The founder of ethnology of religion in Hungary, he played a pivotal role in making it an independent discipline. Concerned with the research history of ethnology of religion and its most important results, this book was prompted by the centenary of Bálint's birth.

His life

Sándor Bálint lived all his life in his native town, Szeged, to the study of which he devoted most of his scholarly efforts. After the Communist take-over of Hungary, he was completely ostracised. He was denied the recognition he was due and received no sympathy from either his colleagues in the field or his university workplace. His Christian charitableness was treated as naïvety. His daily struggle to make ends meet was a debilitating burden that took its toll on his work and spirit. His loyalty to his faith, political convictions, Hungarian identity and his people made him an outcast in the counter-selected local and national society of a bleak political era. Friends apart, he was surrounded by hordes of informants.

He was born in Szeged-Alsóváros on the Day of Saint Peter's Chains (1st August) 1904 into a simple peasant family of paprika farmers. After his father died he was raised and educated by his mother. Living in an extended family he gained an inside view of the traditional way of life and religiousness that he would later come to study.

He received his baccalaureate from the Piarist grammar school. His ethnological interests were deeply rooted in this Piarist background. From the 18th century onwards the Piarists assumed a key role in the research of Szeged folk life. In the 19th century the research of peasant culture was virtually passed down from hand to hand.¹ Sándor Bálint went to the university in Szeged that had fled from Kolozsvár (Cluj, Transylvania) and had settled in Szeged in 1921.² The first department of ethnology in Hungary was set up there in 1929, under the direction of Sándor Solymossy. Sándor Bálint worked there first as an unpaid research student and later as an assistant. The government transferred Solymossy's

1 BÁLINT 1971a.

2 MINKER 2003.

professorate to the University of Budapest in 1934, but Solymossy had previously habilitated Bálint as *privat docent*.³

Between 1931 and 1945 Sándor Bálint taught at the Catholic Teacher Training College in Szeged. He considered himself chiefly a teacher. And not only did he teach in the classroom or in his textbooks, but also by his own life's example. His immense erudition, his deep faith and humanity were a source of great inspiration to all. To this day his students speak of him in glowing terms. In 1947 he was appointed to an ordinary professorship at the Department of Ethnology of Szeged University. Between 1945 and 1948 he became involved in politics as a Member of Parliament for the Christian Democratic Party. He was to suffer the consequences after the Communist take-over in 1948 until his death. Between 1951 and 1956 he was disqualified from teaching on ideological grounds and was transferred to the University Library. He was allowed to take up teaching again in January 1957. However, following prolonged police surveillance he was arrested on trumped up charges and received a suspended prison sentence in 1965. He was forced into retirement in 1966. The police surveillance and court case records make sadly illuminating reading.⁴ Sándor Bálint died in a car accident in Budapest on 10th May 1980.

His work

Sándor Bálint was a highly educated teacher and scholar, at home in classical languages, literary history, music history, history, architecture, geography, ecclesiastical history, liturgical history, ethnology and folkloristics. He took a complex approach in teaching these subjects at college and university. To sum up his professional creed, he sought to make peasant culture part of national culture.

One of his major research areas embraced history, cultural history, folk life and the life of what he referred to as the 'Szeged colonies' [*szegedi kirajzások*]. In the course of its history—especially in the 19th century—Szeged sent off a number of settlers to locations round South Hungary. These 'colonies' have, since the Treaty of Trianon (1920), been divided among three countries. It was these 'colonies' that Sándor Bálint studied. As a result, the town of Szeged and the Szeged region have become one of the most closely explored regions in Hungary with regard to the peasant past and culture. Sándor Bálint did not study the culture of only a single social class, the peasantry. He viewed culture as a whole in a social, historical and European context and took an interdisciplinary approach in his studies and interpretations.

This paper will attempt to give a brief summary of his activity in the field of ethnology of religion which was only one area of his prolific output. He is widely regarded as an authority in the field even by European comparison.

3 BÁLINT 1981.

4 KAHLER 2003, VELCSOV 1995 (manuscript), PÉTER 2004.

His position on, and approach to, the study of ethnology of religion developed gradually. At a conference in 1929 he called attention to the fact that research should be extended to 'the more intensive ecclesiastical-historical study of the Great Plain, being one of the key factors in the peasant culture of that region. There is a need to explore whether the Hungarian psyche contains an ancient religious heritage, Asian traditions, and there is a need to study its modifications—Protestant or Catholic—and *couleur locale* in comparison with the universal Catholic or Protestant principle. We need to research the heretic movements which are manifestations of the Great Plain Magyar's spiritual quests.'⁵ He held the research of religion to be 'the most neglected, most mysterious, indeed most challenging [...] and most encouraging' area. In the context of religious history and the history of ideas he pointed out the borderland character of Szeged and the South Great Plain where Western and Eastern Christianity met and where Reformation and Catholic renewal coexisted.⁶

Sándor Bálint attached great importance to the study of everyday Christian religiousness and the research/interpretation of both Hungarian and European contexts. It is a great shame that his works on folk religiousness have only appeared in Hungarian and for the most part continue to be unavailable to the rest of the world. Christian religiousness was his 'maternal inheritance,' he writes in his autobiography. Indeed, living with his widowed mother in the peasant community of Szeged-Alsóváros, as a child Bálint would have witnessed the last vestige of an out-of-church religious practice that had originated in the 17th and 18th centuries, was independent and self-sufficient and governed by its own rules. This consisted of a community practice of faith, pilgrimages, oral traditions and a unique conception of the world which was for a long time called mediaeval, but which has nevertheless recently made a comeback. The leaders of this practice were the so-called 'holy persons' [*szentemberek*], lay precentors, song-writers, prayer-leaders, organisers of confraternities.

It was his childhood experiences, then, that fostered Sándor Bálint's interest in religious studies. His efforts were confirmed by contemporaneous influences of German ethnology.⁷ In his first important comprehensive summary, *Népünk ünnepei. Az egyházi év néprajza* [Hungarian Folk Feasts. The Ethnography of the Church Year], he set forth his views on folk religiousness and ethnology of religion. He held the distinctive folk psychology to be the conceptual basis of folk religiousness, whose 'attitude to the world was essentially emotional'. Not inferior, but *different* from that of the educated classes. 'The world and life are to him [the peasant] equally intriguing, a mystery which [...] he too endeavours to understand and explain in his own terms. His interpretations [...] seek the essence [...], he is after universal relations, [...] his attitude to the world is subjective,' he accepts the norms mediated by tradition.⁸ The religious life of the Magyar people

5 *Népünk és Nyelvünk* [Our people and our language], 1930 (1929), vol. I/268.

6 BÁLINT 1930, 184–187.

7 PÉTER 1974.

8 BÁLINT 1938, 7–9.

was transformed when they converted to Christianity. The Church offered a categorical explanation of religiousness and conception of the world; it sanctified every aspect of life and 'put life at the service of the cult'.⁹ 'Folk religiousness is an artistic composition [...] its perception of Christian doctrines is not some notion of moral edification but an artistic conception.'¹⁰ He summed up his ideas by saying that 'folk religiousness is not a fabric of principles or conceptual subtleties, [...] but rather, it is life itself in which the emotions of the heart take delight.'¹¹

He thought ethnology of religion to possess independence of attitude and methodology within the system of ethnology. It is a special, separate branch of learning that came into being at the intersection of various different disciplines.¹² 'It endeavours to study the reaction of the peasant soul to Catholic precepts,'¹³ and all the varieties of local religious practice. The Church 'did not eliminate [...] the ancient traditions of the peoples who espoused Christianity [...] but merely transformed and sanctified these traditions [...]'¹⁴ Any previous religious phenomena became survival phenomena.¹⁵

Even in his later works Sándor Bálint stuck with this liturgical approach. Already decades ago he was interested in the past and present ways of inculturation, the religious culture that emerged in its wake and, the types and functioning of its historical layers.

The first larger chapter in *Népiünk ünnepei* [Hungarian Folk Feasts] presents the religious community, the cult, sacred time and space. Consequently, it interprets religious phenomena as an equation of variables including space, time, society and historical traditions. This conception might be termed phenomenological.¹⁶ The second part of the book is devoted to the ethnology of the Church Year, i.e. the customs related to Catholic feasts such as Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. It regularly cites relevant Protestant, mediaeval and Central European contexts, too.

The study of folk religiousness broadened Sándor Bálint's horizons in several areas, such as one of the most debated fundamental theoretical questions, the definition of 'people/folk'. Already in the 1930s and 1940s Sándor Bálint did not confine his understanding of 'people/folk' to include the peasantry only. He gave it a broader interpretation which consisted of each and every social class and group provided it had a community culture of its own. Published in 1938, *Népiünk ünnepei* chiefly focuses on the peasantry, but a decade later Sándor Bálint put forward his claim that the peasantry, the class of serfs, the village folk were

9 BÁLINT 1938, 10.

10 BÁLINT 1938, 12.

11 BÁLINT 1938, 12–13.

12 BÁLINT 1938, 14. He refers to Hans Koren (1936) and Georg Schreiber (1933), and to the Hungarians Elemér Schwartz (1934) and Géza Karsai (1937). German and Austrian research always had a powerful influence on Hungarian research.

13 BÁLINT 1938, 14.

14 BÁLINT 1938, 14–15.

15 BÁLINT 1938, 10.

16 The Department of Ethnology at Szeged University launched in 1999 a special course in ethnology of religion founded on this concept, perhaps the most direct continuation of Sándor Bálint's efforts.

not the only 'conveyors of folk life'; albeit it assumed a key role in the preservation of certain characteristics on account of its observance of traditions. It cannot be doubted therefore that the people living in the same geographical, economic, historical and spiritual milieu will—despite any prevailing social, financial, or even political differences—constitute at least a virtual community. Individual and occupational differences notwithstanding, there is some kind of a sameness in their everyday comings and goings, their feast behaviour, in the dialect they speak, their system of conventions, their tastes, the food they eat, in the stylistic faculties manifested in their pastimes—in other words, they 'react' uniformly or at least similarly.¹⁷

As regards the historical roots of pilgrimage, he referred to the individual and penitential pilgrimages of the Middle Ages, but in its Baroque form, he considered pilgrimage to be chiefly a community phenomenon. Sándor Bálint published several studies on the world of pilgrimage places.¹⁸ Having reviewed the pilgrimage of Szeged folk to Radna,¹⁹ in 1939 he wrote a comprehensive summary of the ethnological approach to, and known findings of, pilgrimages.²⁰ In the 1930s and 1940s he published a long series of articles presenting the pilgrimage places of Hungary.²¹ In 1944 he brought out *Boldogasszony vendégségében* [A Guest of Our Lady] on the most important Marian pilgrimage places of the Carpathian Basin. In it he gives very apt, interpretative, psychological descriptions of each pilgrimage place. The illustrations of the book were among the first to call attention to the richness of small graphic works related to the pilgrimage places.²²

Although Sándor Bálint had always stressed the community character of 'folk culture' and 'folk religiousness,' he was the first to study the individualistic features and leading figures of folk religiousness, the so-called 'holy persons' [*szentemberek*] and their unique world and personality. *Egy magyar szentember, Orosz István önéletrajza* [Autobiography of István Orosz, a Hungarian Holy Person] was a ground-breaking, seminal work not only in ethnology of religion, but also in biographical research. His introduction presents in a broad historical perspective the origins²³ of this religious type of man that date back to mediaeval and the early modern-age licentiate traditions.²⁴

We owe to Bálint the first analysis of prayers, dating from 1937.²⁵ His survey of the paraliturgical world of folk religiousness, of pilgrimages and the worship of saints broadened the thematic and interpretational horizons of the research.

17 BÁLINT 1987, 8. These thoughts of Sándor Bálint's date from 1947–1948. They did not appear in print for decades, but circulated in manuscript.

18 Cf. select bibliography.

19 BÁLINT 1936.

20 BÁLINT 1939.

21 Cf. select bibliography

22 BÁLINT 1944a.

23 BÁLINT 1942.

24 JUHÁSZ 1921.

25 BÁLINT 1937.

Published in 1944, *Sacra Hungaria*, a collection of essays, is remarkable in this respect. It consists of twelve writings in three chapters.²⁶ 'The Hungarian Catholic past' gives an overview of the Hungarian history of the Marian cult and its international implications, citing Our Lady Dressed in the Sun, Our Lady of Loreto and Our Lady of Czestochowa as an example. 'The Hungarian Catholic landscape' describes the way in which pilgrimages shaped the landscape, and presents the historical roots of the religious life of Szeged, the broader South Hungary and the Rozsnyó (today Rožňava, Slovakia) area.

Written in 1948, his survey of the research history of ethnology of religion concluded a fertile decade. Like all good appraisals, Sándor Bálint's paper sums up the research work of the recent past and by doing so he is able to point out the research tasks waiting to be done and any deficiencies that may have occurred – thematic and methodological. His paper remained unpublished until 1987.²⁷ He begins by emphasising again that 'ethnological research [...] cannot be limited to the study of the tradition-bound classes [...] but must take into account the religious manifestations of the whole of society.'²⁸ He establishes his main principle by stating that religious folk life has to be examined integrally in the context and universality of life. This universality existed historically until the Age of Enlightenment, and until then there had been no great differences between the individual denominations and the individual social classes in the 'style and degree of the outward manifestations of faith'.²⁹ Accepting the inductive research methods of ethnology, he regrets ethnology's failing to attempt to 'chart, and offer explicit interpretation of, social reality and the world concept'.³⁰

He considers the attitude and research methodology of ethnology of religion to be highly synthetic. He sums up the origins of the discipline, the examples from German research and the most important Hungarian results. This study excellently highlights the integrative role of ethnology of religion. In his discussion of the origins he speaks of the ethnological/anthropological research of religion and folk belief. He stresses that liturgical history and church history are the most important auxiliary disciplines. He maintains that the study of religious folk poetry should examine the oral traditions, folk notions of the Bible, popular book culture, prayers and prayer books and song books. The so-called 'holy persons' [*szentemberek*], i.e. important in religious life, were the conveyors of this culture. Religious life permeated the material world, too, and Bálint attached great importance to art historical and iconographical survey and the analysis of sacred symbolism and small reproduced graphic works with religious themes.³¹ A detailed bibliography rounds off his comprehensive summary.

World War II and the subsequent communist and socialist ideological dictatorship thwarted for a long time the publication of major works of ethnology

26 BÁLINT 1944b.

27 BÁLINT 1987.

28 BÁLINT 1987, pp. 8–9.

29 BÁLINT 1987, pp. 9–10.

30 BÁLINT 1987, p. 12.

31 BÁLINT 1987, pp. 14–38.

of religion. Nevertheless, the church press brought out a great many of Bálint's writings on various religious phenomena.³² In the 1950s and 1960s he published some important books on the Szeged dialect and the cultural history of Szeged.³³ In the 1960s he contributed chapters on folk religiousness to the ethnological monographs on Orosháza (1965) and Tápé (1971).³⁴

Sándor Bálint's seminal comprehensive work, *Karácsony, húsvét, pünkösd* [Christmas, Easter, Whitsun] and the two volumes of *Ünnepi kalendárium* [Feast Calendar] appeared in the 1970s. These books are considered to be his chefs-d'oeuvre. They are dazzling displays of his knowledge of ethnology, folkloristics, cultural history, ecclesiastical history, literary history, heortology, theology, liturgical history, music history and linguistics. He puts everything in a historical and Central European context and takes into consideration the Romanian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Slovakian, Czech and Austrian material. Among the most sought-after books of Hungarian libraries, they are important as textbooks, too. Typical of the milieu in which these works appeared is the fact that only the publishing house of the Catholic Church was willing to bring them out. *Karácsony, húsvét, pünkösd* surveys the traditions related to the major church feasts and the liturgical and paraliturgical phenomena that infiltrated into everyday life. The two volumes of *Ünnepi kalendárium* review the feasts of Mary and the saints in the order of the Church Year, month by month. Each description starts with a comprehensive survey and interpretation of the relevant sources. For each feast Bálint lists the historical facts and relevant legends, apocryphal and literary traditions, and the role of liturgy and monasticism. He reviews the results of patrociniun and settlement history, and iconography. He gives highly detailed descriptions of the prayers, codices, popular literature, and folk hymn books, and also examines the sacramentals, beliefs, paraliturgical customs and culinary traditions.³⁵

In *Szeged reneszánsz kori műveltsége* [Renaissance Culture in Szeged] Bálint outlined Szeged's socio-economic history and its cultural aspects in the 15th and 16th centuries.³⁶ He gave a vivid description of monastic culture, the university and literary culture imported by Szeged students studying abroad, and of the role of the Szeged diasporas that were formed in the wake of the Reformation and the Turkish occupation. He was the first to examine the Szeged aspects³⁷ of the miracle stories recorded at the grave of Saint John Capistran (who died after the capture of Nándorfehérvár)³⁸ at Újlak (today Ilok, Croatia). His immense

32 Péter 1974 passim

33 Bálint 1957, Bálint 1959.

34 Bálint 1965, Bálint 1971b.

35 Bálint 1973, Bálint 1977.

36 Bálint 1975.

37 For a subsequent detailed analysis see Fügedi 1981.

38 The victorious battle against the Turks at Nándorfehérvár (today Belgrade) on 22 July 1456 halted Ottoman advance for fifty years. Prior to the siege, on 29 June 1456, Pope Calixtus III ordered the bells to be rung at midday to remind the faithful that they should pray for the welfare of the crusaders. After the battle he made the feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord (6 August) a universal event.

background knowledge of the topic is remarkable. His interdisciplinary, synthesising attitude has not lost its freshness and is truly exemplary.

The same can be said about his book *Szeged-Alsóváros* which appeared posthumously. The subtitle is *Templom és társadalom* [Church and Society]. Bálint examines the history, everyday life and religious culture of this agrarian quarter of the town in relation to the Franciscan monastery and church. The presence and unique spirituality of the Franciscan order to a large extent determined the spiritual culture of not only the Alsóváros, but also the whole town and area. That is particularly tangible in the local pilgrimage cult. The Franciscan church in Szeged-Alsóváros is a Marian pilgrimage place. Its pilgrimage feast, Our Lady of the Snow (5 August), brought together the religious life within a radius of several hundred kilometres. *Szeged-Alsóváros* is regarded as the first Hungarian monograph on a pilgrimage place.³⁹

Published in the yearbook of the Ferenc Móra Museum, the three hefty tomes of *A szögedi nemzet* [The People of Szeged] is a summary of his researches in and around Szeged. The third volume appeared posthumously in 1980.⁴⁰ In it, Bálint sums up his previous researches on the religious folk life of his home town. He maintains that the uniqueness and homogeneous religious life of the Szeged region was most apparent in its feast customs, which he discussed in the chapter 'The yearly order of nature and liturgy'. He presents the beliefs, rites and religious traditions related to each day of the week. In 'The folk traditions of religious life' he focuses on sacred buildings and spaces. He introduces the leaders of religious life, the priest and the monk, and the lay religious leaders (such as the singers, song-writers, healers, pilgrimage leaders). His description of the local pilgrimage feast and the world of the pilgrimage places visited by the Szeged people is rich in detail. Owing to Sándor Bálint's work, the folk religiousness of Szeged is well known.

Sándor Bálint attached great importance to communicating his research results to a wider readership, so from the 1930s he contributed frequently to local and national papers. He looked forward to the publication of his *A hagyomány szolgálatában* [In the Service of Tradition], but it came out posthumously. The chapter on folk religious life consists of essays that demonstrate the thematic and methodological richness of ethnology of religion. The writings on the belief system of a village, a lay religious song-writer, the relations between patronage and local cult, liturgy and folk tradition, and on the historical roots of proverbs achieved what they set out to do.⁴¹

Before his tragic death he had decided to write about pilgrimages and the ethnology of the seven sacraments. Drawing on Bálint's posthumous papers, the author of this introduction published *Búcsújáró magyarok* [Hungarians on

39 BÁLINT 1983.

40 BÁLINT 1976, 1978 and 1980.

41 BÁLINT 1981.

pilgrimage] which explores the cultural history and the European links of pilgrimages in Hungary.⁴² The other topic has yet to be researched.

Some of Sándor Bálint's studies appeared posthumously in German.⁴³ Scholars and editors have devoted several collections of essays to his memory.⁴⁴ His biography has been written.⁴⁵ Several biographical memoirs have been published.⁴⁶ His posthumous papers, rich thematic library and collection of sacred objects went to the Ferenc Móra Museum in Szeged and are in the care of a nine-member trust. Following the political transition a statue was erected to the memory of Sándor Bálint on Mátyás tér, by the Franciscan church in his home town, Szeged-Alsóváros. His statue stands among the greatest in the Szeged Pantheon. A street, school, cultural centre and dance group around Szeged bear his name. There are reminders, points of reference, and many in whose minds he lives on. It has been suggested that he should be put forward for beatification. Only parts of his work have been evaluated.⁴⁷

His work is celebrated by exhibitions on the centenary of his birth. His birthplace will shortly be converted into a memorial museum. A memorial volume, scholarly publications and special periodical issues will remember him, a great man of Szeged, one of 20th-century Hungary's leading professors of ethnology, the most eminent scholar of ethnology of religion in Hungary. Publications reviewing religious ethnological research will be dedicated to his memory.

42 BÁLINT—BARNA 1994.

43 BÁLINT 1994, BÁLINT 2000., BÁLINT 2014.

44 The following list is not intended to be exhaustive: BARTHA 1980, BARNA 1982, Tüskés (ed) 1986 and LACKOVITS 2000.

45 LELE Jnr 1996.

46 RÓNAI 2001.

47 Tüskés 1986.

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